

INTERNATIONAL CITY MANAGERS' ASSOCIATION

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SPECIAL INFORMATION CENTERS IN CITY HALLS

What kinds of special information centers are provided in city hall lobbies for the convenience of citizens who come to the city hall?

A central information office or counter near the front entrance to the city hall or in the city hall lobby helps to create good relations with the public. Some of the new city halls also have the finance office on the first floor with an open counter facing the lobby and in such cases special arrangements may not be necessary. A small city may need only a building directory and signs and arrows indicating offices. Those cities, however, that have large city hall lobbies and open counters fronting the lobby, may need to provide a special desk or counter because citizens do not always know to what offices they should go. Citizens who are shunted from one office to another naturally become irritated, especially if they have a complaint to make, and the city loses much good will.

The city of Dayton, Ohio, recently felt the need for some sort of special information center. MIS at the request of the city manager of Dayton sent an inquiry to a number of city managers and the replies received from 11 places are summarized in this report. The places supplying data are: Phoenix, Ariz.; Pasadena and San Diego, Calif.; Wichita, Kan.; Montgomery County, Md.; Kansas City, Mo.; Rochester, N.Y.; Dayton, Ohio; Verdun, Que.; Dallas, Tex.; and Norfolk, Va.

Location and Physical Arrangement. The information centers in all eleven cities are located in or near the city hall lobby, and they are near the principal public entrance. The actual physical arrangements vary, however, San Diego has a semi-circular counter in one corner of the lobby opposite the bank of elevators. Phoenix uses the switchboard operator who has her board located just inside the main entrance to the city hall. Wichita has an enclosed PBX room with glass windows that is used as an information center.

An enclosed octagonal shaped counter is used in Dallas (see photograph). The booth faces the building elevators and is located at the foot of the stairway. In Dayton two desks are located in the city hall lobby facing the main entrance to the city hall and adjacent to the stairways and elevators. Two employees are used in Dayton because the desks handle a number of "service requests" as well as formal complaints of all kinds and routine requests for information (see photograph). The location and arrangement of information centers in the city hall lobbies in Dayton and Kansas City are shown in sketches below.

Types of Inquiries Handled. Responses from the cities showed that the great majority of questions received at public information counters are of a routine nature. Citizens are concerned with the location of city offices, the location of county, state, and federal offices, general information about city services, where to get licenses, and a number of questions on the location of streets, buildings, restaurants, theatres, and stores.

In San Diego and Norfolk, for example, the information centers are intended for questions on the location of offices, general information about the city and

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the city government, and the proper offices to handle various questions on taxes, licenses, and permits.

In Dayton, Rochester, and Montgomery County the information center receives complaints and requests for various city services. In Norfolk citizens with complaints are referred directly to the appropriate department or to the city manager's office. In Kansas City the employee at the information counter refers most complaints to the appropriate city department, and all departments have well organized and systematic procedures for receiving and following-up on complaints.

Use of Complaint Procedures. Only Dayton, Montgomery County, and Rochester combine complaints and requests for various services with the central information center. In Montgomery County public information facilities are located in front offices adjacent to the public entrances in the suburban offices at Bethesda and Silver Spring. The clerks in these offices fill out a duplicate complaint form with the original sent to the appropriate department for action. The duplicate is kept in a tickler file and followed up weekly.

In Dayton the "citizen's information report" shows the department for whom intended, the citizen's name, address, telephone number, the information given, and the person receiving the complaint. The lower half of the form has space for departmental action and shows to whom assigned, the investigation procedure, the action taken, whether the investigation showed the need for change in general policy or procedure, whether the citizen was contacted, and citizen's reaction, if any. Two copies of the report are sent to the department for action, and one copy is returned to the central information desk. The central information desk then maintains a systematic follow-up on these departmental referrals.

Dayton also uses a simpler form called an "information report" that shows the name, address, and telephone number of the citizen and the information given. Only one copy of this form is filled out and no follow-up is made when it is referred to the appropriate department. The form is used for passing citizens' suggestions to city officials for less formal complaints and routine requests.

The information booth in the Rochester city hall is part of the public service bureau. Complaints are received at the information desk and forwarded to the office of the public service bureau for referral to the proper department and prompt follow-up. The public service bureau is open 24 hours a day, every day in the year, and it serves both for information and for complaints and requests for service. The office has a battery of telephones connected with the city hall switchboard with day and night numbers available at all times. The office also has a direct line to police headquarters.

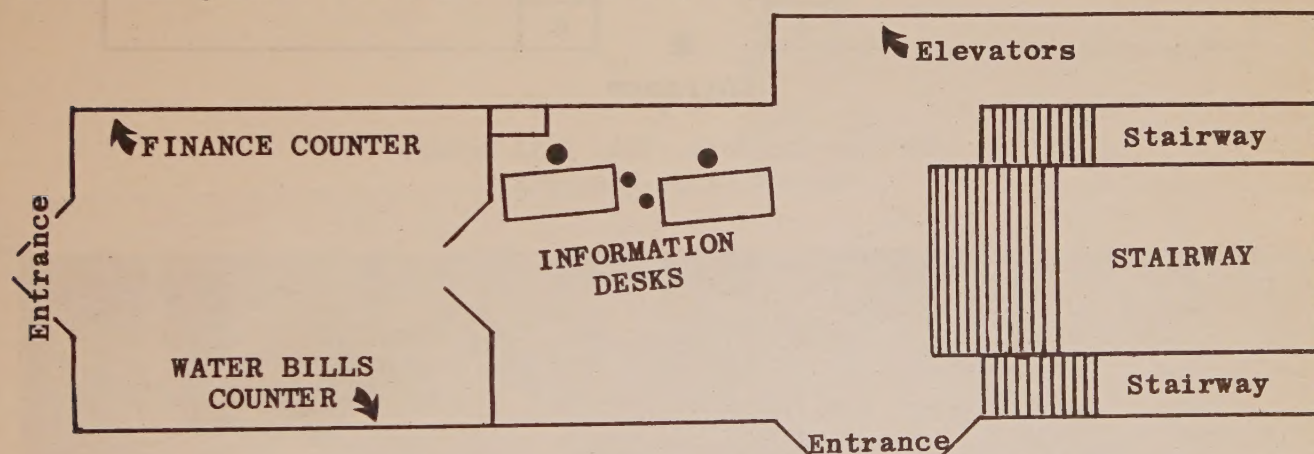
In Rochester, when calls involving complaints or requests for service are received, factual information is written up on a quadruplicate form with two copies going to the department concerned. These service requests are sent by messenger directly to the department. Three bureau employees check these reports and follow through to see that disposition has been made. These employees also telephone or write to the individual citizen to ask him if satisfactory service has been rendered.

Experience and Training for Information Clerks. Most of the 11 cities require the same basic qualifications for employees who are assigned to the information counters. Generally this consists of high school education plus some experience in general office work (perhaps one year of experience) involving contacts with the public. The requirements are more formalized in some cities. In Pasadena, for example, the position of information clerk has been classified as Clerk II with

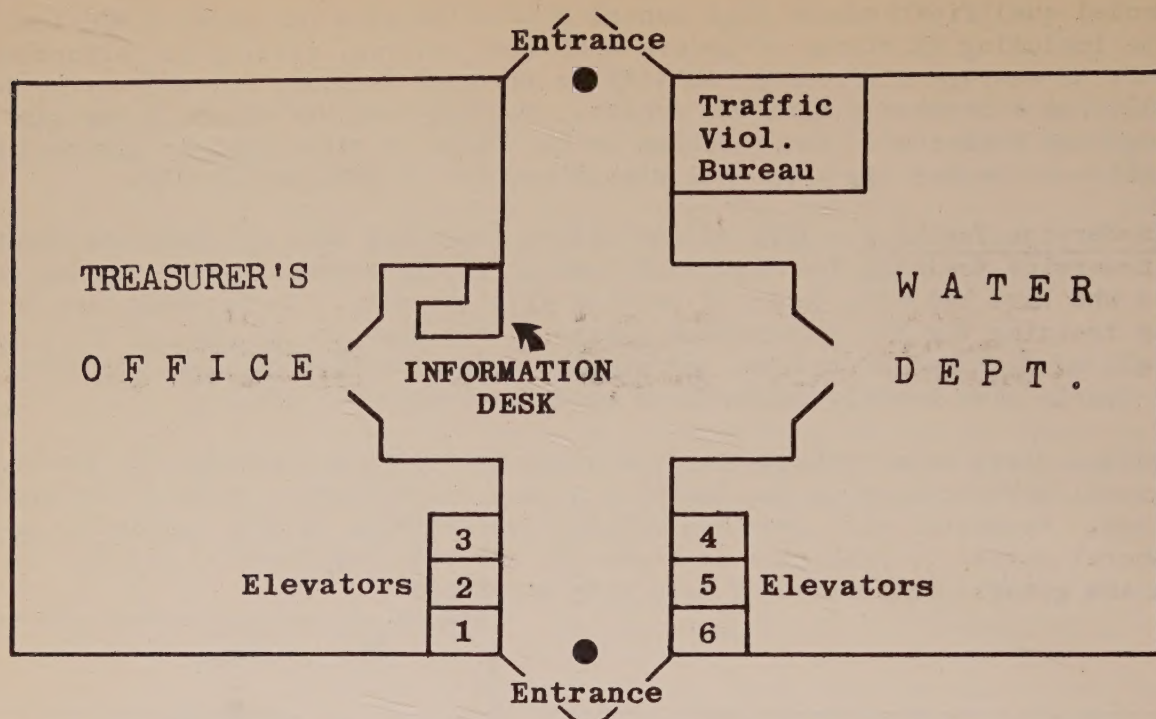
recommended qualifications of high school graduation plus one year of clerical experience including knowledge of modern office procedures, ability to perform clerical work of average difficulty, ability to use good English, and ability to deal tactfully but effectively with the public. The requirements are much the same in San Diego and Rochester. The position in San Diego is classified as Intermediate Clerk while Rochester has a special classification of Information Clerk.

In-Service Training. Many of the cities reporting have not been concerned with in-service training for their information clerks because they are using employees who have had many years of service with the city. In Pasadena the in-service training for the information clerks is the same as the general training given all newly-hired clerks and secretaries. The information clerks in Montgomery County have monthly conferences with the county manager.

Dallas gives brief orientation training, including a trip through the city and general instructions on the location of city departments, streets, and public buildings. Rochester also provides orientation training on city services, names and general duties of principal employees in all city departments, and the location and general activities of each city department.



Information and Service Office, City Hall Lobby, Dayton, Ohio



Information Desk, City Hall Lobby,
Kansas City, Missouri



Information Desk, City Hall Lobby, Dallas, Texas